

January 9, 2004

*Enclosed is a reprint of a report filed on Firehouse.Com News. It contains information about Line of Duty Deaths (LODD) as reported by USFA for 2003. The author looks at some disturbing trends in the LODD in the past several years. These numbers clearly show LODD are on the rise in two areas that are clearly preventable: vehicle accidents and physical fitness.*

*Folks, there's a state law requiring seat belt usage and yet there are departments that do not require the use of seat belts. How can any department defend this disregard for law and for the safety of their personnel? Please seriously consider an apparatus driver training program for your department. EST has endorsed the IFSTA Driver/Operator curriculum and we will do whatever it takes to facilitate driver training in any department in Idaho.*

*The issue of physical fitness is more complex but just as deserving of our attention. Whether addressed through fitness standards, periodic physical assessments, screening for cardiac risk factors, fitness incentives or whatever works in your organization, we owe it to our people and to the communities they serve to diligently monitor their ability to do their jobs.*

*If you need assistance with policies, guidelines, or programs addressing driving, seat belts or physical fitness please give us a call. We do not claim to have all the answers, but can direct you to departments in Idaho and elsewhere with programs up and running that can help you through the rough spots. The EST staff and our technical college partners stand ready to assist you in every way possible to make sure all of your training needs are addressed.*

*"It is time to draw a line in the sand and say, ENOUGH! Our goal must be NO MORE NAMES OF IDAHO FIREFIGHTERS on the LODD list."*

*Jerry Schroeder*

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## **110 Firefighters Lost Lives On Duty In 2003**

HEATHER CASPI, Firehouse.Com News

The United States Fire Administration has announced that a total of 110 firefighters died while on-duty in the United States in 2003, a higher number of fatalities than in most recent years. This number and statistics about the firefighters' deaths are provisional and subject to change as the USFA verifies data and prepares its annual fatality report to be released later this year. The USFA analyzes information about firefighter deaths each year to determine trends and make recommendations that may help reduce fatalities in the future. The USFA's current data shows that despite advances in training and technology, the number of firefighter deaths per year has actually gone up during recent years rather than down. Between 1993 and 2003 the average number of firefighter deaths per year, not including those killed in 2001 due to terrorism at the World Trade Center, was 98 deaths. However in 2000 there were 103 deaths, in 2001 there were 98 plus the 346 World Trade Center Deaths, in 2002 there were 100 deaths and now in 2003, there were 110 deaths. According to the USFA, 36 states and Guam saw at least one firefighter die last year.

## Firefighter Deaths Of The Last 10 Years

- a.. 1993 - 77
- b.. 1994 - 104
- c.. 1995 - 97
- d.. 1996 - 95
- e.. 1997 - 95
- f.. 1998 - 91
- g.. 1999 - 113
- h.. 2000 - 103
- i.. 2001 - 98 plus the 346 World Trade Center deaths, totaling 444
- j.. 2002 - 100
- k.. 2003 - 110

## Causes of Death

Heart attacks were the top cause of death in 2003, claiming the lives of at least 42 firefighters, 38 percent of all firefighter deaths for the year.

The victims ranged from age 35 to 81, with an average age of 52.7. Heart attacks have been a top killer every year studied by the USFA although in 2001 they were dwarfed by the 346 firefighter deaths due to terrorism at the World Trade Center. There were 31 heart attacks in 2002, 34 in 2001, 30 in 2000 and 54 in 1999. The majority of the other firefighters who died on duty in 2003 died of traumatic injuries from motor vehicle accidents, operations at structure fires, wildfires, training accidents, and falls. Sixty firefighters, or 55 percent of all firefighters who died on duty on 2003, suffered injuries from these types of activities, most often motor vehicle accidents. Some of the year's highest profile tragedies involved motor vehicle accidents, including the crash that claimed eight Oregon firefighters on their way home from fighting a wildfire in South Fork, Idaho, and the drunk driving crash that killed 16-year-old Wyoming fire explorer Anndee Huber.

## DEATHS AT STRUCTURE FIRES

There were nine firefighters who died as a result of traumatic injuries sustained at structure fires. Four of these deaths occurred during multiple fatality incidents. John Garman and Kenneth Jutte of the New Bremen German Township Fire Department in Ohio were hosing down dust in a lumber company silo in an effort to avoid an explosion. However an explosion did occur, killing them and injuring others. Also, Charles Zachary and Trent A Kirk of the Memphis, Tennessee Fire Department died from injuries they received when they became trapped inside of a burning Family Dollar store.

## DEATHS AT WILDFIRES

There were seven deaths due to traumatic injuries sustained during operations at wildfires. One of the most well known wildfire tragedies occurred when Novato, California firefighter Steve Rucker died after he and two members of his crew were overrun by fire while operating at the Cedar fire in San Diego County. Two firefighters, Jeff Allen and Shane Heath of the U.S. Forest Service in Salmon, Idaho died during a multiple fatality wildfire incident when they were trapped by fast moving flames on the Cramer Fire. Another firefighter was seriously burned when he was overcome by fire progress during a prescribed burn project and he died from the injuries a month later. There were three deaths due to helicopter crashes while operating at wildfires. One helicopter pilot was killed when he crashed while fighting the McGinnis Flats fire in Washington. Also, firefighter

Randall Bonito Jr. and pilot Jess Pearce were killed when their helicopter crashed while taking firefighters from the Bureau of Indian Affairs to begin an initial attack on a fire in the Aspen Ridge area of Arizona. In addition to the helicopter crashes that occurred during wildfire operations, there were several helicopter crashes that occurred during non-emergency duties, resulting in the deaths of five firefighters. Pilot Richard Warren Black and David Craig Mackey of the Oregon Department of Forestry were killed when their helicopter crashed while they were scouting water holes for future forest fire suppression activities. Pilot Carl Dolbeare and co-pilot John Attardo died when their air tanker crashed due to a cause still to be determined near Redlands, CA, during non-emergency duty. Charles Krennek of the Texas Forest Service died in a helicopter crash while he and his crew were doing an aerial search for Space Shuttle Columbia debris.

#### MOTOR VEHICLE ACCIDENTS

After heart attacks, motor vehicle accidents were the single largest cause of death for firefighters in 2003, claiming 25 lives. These include accidents involving fire apparatus as well as firefighters' personal vehicles. The eight Oregon firefighters killed in a van crash on their way home from a wildfire in South Fork, Idaho comprised the largest multiple fatality incident of 2003. Conflicting results from several blood tests done on the driver have raised the question of whether alcohol was a factor in the crash. Charges of reckless endangerment and drunken driving were filed against the firefighter's employer, First Strike Environmental Co.

Alcohol was confirmed to be a factor in the rollover crash that killed 16-year-old Wyoming fire explorer Anndee Huber. Huber, a 10th grader at Newcastle High School, was ejected from the cab of a tanker and trapped underneath when the driver lost control of the vehicle. The firefighter at the wheel pleaded guilty in July to aggravated vehicular homicide. Another 16-year-old youth firefighter, Karlton Allen Cole Briscoe of the Hickory Flat Volunteer Fire Department in Mississippi, died after he crashed into a ravine while responding to an alarm in his private vehicle. Another unusual motor vehicle accident occurred when firefighter Shane Brown of DeSoto Parish Fire District 8 in Louisiana was killed when he crossed railroad tracks in front of a freight train and was hit.

#### STRUCK BY VEHICLES

Six firefighters were killed in 2003 after being struck by motor vehicles. Most of these deaths occurred while firefighters were working at incidents along the side of the road and were struck by passing motorists. One of these tragedies claimed Assistant Chief Don Billig of the St. Cloud Fire Department in Minnesota as he was replacing a barricade blocking a construction zone. A passing pickup truck struck his crew's truck and then struck Billig, killing him. The driver of the pickup left the scene on foot but then turned himself into law enforcement officials the next morning. A more unusual accident occurred when one firefighter was struck and killed by his department's apparatus. Barry D. Lutsy of the Racine Volunteer Fire Department in West Virginia was struck by the apparatus as it backed into a bay at the fire station after a call.

#### TRAINING ACCIDENTS

There were two deaths due to traumatic injuries sustained during training exercises. Captain Wayne Dillon of the Washington Parish Fire District in Louisiana was participating in a driver training exercise when his tanker

overturned. Firefighter Recruit Wayne Mitchell, 37, of Florida's Miami-Dade Fire Rescue was overcome by heat during simulated shipboard fire training at the Resolve Marine Fire School and died while in transit to the hospital.

#### FELL OR JUMPED

Six firefighters died in 2003 from injuries sustained by falling. There were no reports in 2003 of firefighter deaths due to jumping. Melinda Ohler of the San Francisco Fire Department died from head injuries received after she fell out of the back of the open cab of the fire apparatus she was riding as it responded to what turned out to be a false alarm. In a somewhat similar incident, Jason Lee Ellis of the Loretto, Tennessee Fire Department was critically injured when he also suffered head injuries after falling from the back of a moving vehicle. Ellis fell out of a pick-up truck and hit his head on the road while traveling from the training grounds to the front of the campus at the Tennessee Fire Service and Codes Enforcement Academy. He died a week after the incident.

Other fatal falls occurred when two firefighters fell from ladders, another passed out due to a cardiac arrhythmia and struck his head on the pavement, and another suffered a head injury after falling from a lawnmower while cutting the department's lawn in the area of an incline.

#### DROWNING

There were no reports of firefighter deaths from drowning in 2003.

#### ILLNESS OR UNDETERMINED CAUSES

Eight firefighters died of illnesses or undetermined causes while on duty. One very notable case is that of Barry M. Bennett, 49, who died as a result of an on-duty exposure to Hepatitis C. The USFA reports that Bennett, a member of the Cambridge, Massachusetts Fire Department, was punctured by a needle while rendering assistance at a medical emergency on October 15, 1987. The exposure was reported immediately and Bennett began a course of medical treatment and observation. After testing positive for Hepatitis C he began a more aggressive form of treatment. Bennett was promoted to Lieutenant on September 18, 1998 and continued to work until early 2003 when he could no longer perform his duties, the USFA reported. Bennett received a new liver in May 2003 but succumbed to the illness on November 2, 2003. Most of the other deaths in this category are attributed to stress/exertion but have not been confirmed to be the result of a heart attack or other illness. These firefighters' activities at the time they died include hiking, directing traffic and exercising.

#### OTHER DEATHS

Firefighter Mark Tyler Franklin of the Charlotte, North Carolina Fire Department suffered a knee injury at a structure fire in April 2003. He underwent knee surgery in October 2003 and died from a pulmonary embolism (blood clot) as a result of the surgery.

#### MULTIPLE FATALITY INCIDENTS

According to the USFA, 20 firefighters died in seven multiple fatality incidents. The largest was the incident where eight Oregon firefighters were killed in a vehicle accident as they returned from fighting wildfires. In addition, two Memphis firefighters died while fighting a fire in a business in June; two Idaho firefighters were killed in July when a wildland fire spread quickly and trapped them; two firefighters died as a result of a helicopter crash in Arizona in July; two Ohio firefighters were killed in an explosion while operating at a silo fire in October; two Nevada-based

firefighters were killed in an October airtanker crash in California; and two Oregon firefighters died in a helicopter crash in October.

#### Additional Details

The youngest firefighters to die on duty in 2003 were 16-year-olds Anndee Huber and Karlton Allen Cole Briscoe, killed in motor vehicle accidents. In 2002 an even younger youth firefighter, 14-year-old Christopher Kangas, died when he was struck by a vehicle while responding on his bicycle to a fire incident. The oldest firefighter to die in 2003 was 81-year-old Wentzell Harding, who suffered a heart attack while en route to establish a traffic control point, causing his private vehicle to leave the roadway and collide into a tree. A police officer and two citizens pulled Wentzell from the burning vehicle but attempts at reviving him failed. Three women died in the line of duty in 2003; Mindy Ohler of the San Francisco Fire Department who suffered head injuries after falling from an open cab, Wyoming fire explorer Anndee Huber who died in a tanker rollover, and Dixie Steckelberg, 60, of Lovilia Fire and Rescue in Iowa, who suffered a heart attack. In 2002 six women died in the line of duty. According to the USFA, full-time career firefighters comprised 30 deaths in 2003, 27 percent of the 110 deaths. Volunteer, seasonal and part-time firefighters accounted for 80 deaths, 73 percent of all firefighter deaths for 2003.